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Articoli/1:

The Epistemological Function of Monsters in the Middle Ages.
From The Voyage of Saint Brendan to Herzog Ernst, Marie de France, Marco Polo and John Mandeville. What Would We Be Without Monsters in Past and Present!

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Abstract: Monsters in the Middle Ages assumed significant epistemological functions, providing an image of the complete 'other' in the human quest for the self. Since late antiquity teratology played a big role in literature, art, philosophy, and religion, but meaning and relevance of monsters changed from author to author (the same applies to their visual representation). This article provides an overview of how the image of the monster changed throughout times and how individual writers evaluated them.

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The critical examination of monster lore, miracles, marvels, portents, and the like has a long history, especially because the study of the Other, the complete *alter*, has proven to be fundamental in the analysis of the history of mentality, spirituality, and ideology both in the past and in the present. In fact, in light of modern conditions all over the world, with ever more people migrating, emigrating, and immigrating, leading to ever more cultural problems, issues, and conflicts[1], scholarly investigations of how the experience with 'the Other' was dealt with in the Middle Ages promise to yield far-reaching insights for us today as well as a model of how individuals, groups of people, or societies reacted to and dealt with

[1] The issue is huge, almost overwhelming, and of extreme relevance for our world, see, for instance, T. Golash-Boza, *Immigration Nation: Raids, Detentions, and Deportations in Post-9/11 America*, Boulder 2012; K. R. Arnold, *Anti-Immigration in the United States: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara, CA, 2011; Immigration Worldwide: Policies, Practices, and Trends, ed. U. A. Segal, D. Elliott, and N. S. Mayadas, Oxford and New York 2010; P. Panayi, *An Immigration History of Britain: Multicultural Racism Since 1800*, Harlow, England, and New York 2010; L. Dinnerstein, *Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration*, 5th ed., New York 2009.

outsiders and foreigners[2]. In this paper I will first outline the history of teratology (the study of monsters) from antiquity to the late Middle Ages in order to lay the foundation and to help the reader grasp the larger cultural-historical context. Subsequently I will turn to a variety of literary examples and exemplify with them what the epistemological function of monsters might have been in the premodern world, which then will facilitate our comprehension today of how we project and evaluate foreigners and 'the foreign' all by itself.

As we will observe, medieval writers demonstrated a great interest in the unfamiliar, the exotic, the strange and bizarre, but not simply because they enjoyed these features for their colorfulness and excitement, that is, for aesthetic pleasure — a very postmodern concept with little if any implications for the Middle Ages, for instance — but because they carried profound theological, philosophical meaning and helped them to gain deeper insight in their own epistemic horizon and intellectual framework.[3] The reasons for this intrigue with alterity at large are many, such as the quest to determine one's own identity, to explore the dialectics of good and evil, of self and other, and then to comprehend how to decipher this world, so much filled with endless but often incomprehensible manifestations of God.

Every culture knows this curious phenomenon of monsters, of terrifying creatures that represent complete alterity and challenge every basic notion of self and identity within a cultural paradigm. We as people define ourselves, in epistemological terms, by difference, by practically setting ourselves apart from others, then in linguistic terms (foreign languages versus mother tongue), with regard to food, clothing, habits, values, ideals, customs, and outer appearance. The horror scenarios of a completely homogenized society, of Alphas and Betas, etc., such as in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), or of a militarized world where everyone wears uniforms, are uncannily just too familiar to us, and this more than ever since the twentieth century often characterized my military dictatorships (Hitler, Mussolini, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot, etc.). This explains,

[2] See, for instance, M. Münkler, *Erfahrung des Fremden: Die Beschreibung Ostasiens in den Augenzeugenberichten des 13. und 14. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 2000; cf. the contributions to the *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU*, ed. K. Szende and M. Sebök, Vol. 6 (2000), esp. in the section "Constructing and Deconstructing Frontiers". For theoretical and pragmatic approaches mostly from modern perspectives, see the contributions to *Kulturthema Fremdheit: Leitbegriffe und Problemfelder kulturwissenschaftlicher Fremdheitsforschung*, ed. A. Wierlacher, Munich 1993. Xenology has grown into a research field of its own, see, for instance, B. Waldenfels, *The Question of the Other*, Albany, NY, and Hong Konk 2007 (Tang Chun-I Lecture Series); D. M. Freidenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law*, Berkeley, CA, 2011. The list of relevant studies is actually legion. I find Alexandra Cuffel's *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic*, Notre Dame, IN, 2007, particularly fruitful in this historical-philosophical and anthropological context. We might have to widen our investigative scope by including a discussion of how western Christians viewed Jews and Muslims, but this goes far beyond the purposes of this study. See, however, R. Chazan, *The Jews of Medieval Western Christendom 1000-1500*, Cambridge 2006.

[3] For a very useful overview, see L. Verner, *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in the Middle Ages*, New York and London 2005; see also G.-H. Schumacher, *Monster und Dämonen: Unfälle der Natur, eine Kulturgeschichte*, Berlin 1993; R. Simek, *Erde und Kosmos im Mittelalter: Das Weltbild vor Kolumbus*, Munich 1992, pp. 105-23.

however, also the 'existence' of monsters in human imagination as some of the most extreme oppositional figures in contrast to the uniform and streamlined members of the own group, both in past and present. If there are no monsters, we invent them, and once we have explored and colonized those territories where they were supposed to live, we project monsters in even further lands far beyond our reach to allow us to continue the eternal human quest.

Not surprisingly, the entire genre of contemporary science fiction movies, predicated on deep space explorations, draws very much on the tradition of monster lore, but then translates it into modern or postmodern creatures that have to be overcome and destroyed for the human travelers to survive[4]. Significantly, all monsters are terrifyingly similar to us, except that they then differ from us in some major aspects after all, otherwise they would be nothing but the nasty, mean-spirited, but boring and little meaningful neighbors next door. By contrast, if monsters were projected as completely alien, we would not be able to recognize them as such. Nuclear radiation, biological and chemical weapons, or natural viral attacks, for instance, which can kill people in large numbers, are certainly dreaded everywhere, but not described in the same way as monsters. Psychologically speaking, in essence the monster is really the beast in us, however, presented on the literary or artistic stage, challenging us, or rather themselves, depending on the perspective. Not surprisingly, teratology has a great pedigree, extending as far back as the antiquity, if not further[5].

For thinkers and writers in antiquity, monsters were odd creatures, but only results of extraordinary births, portents of future events, while medieval authors generally regarded monsters as inexplicable but inclusive elements of God's creation. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), for instance, argued in her *Causae et curae* that monsters were the offsprings of people who had copulated with animals, one of the worst sins in Christian minds. Albertus Magnus (1193/1206-1280) took a more neutral position and defined monsters as disruptions of the natural human development. For Nicholas Oresme (ca. 1320/1325-1382) the deficiency of the male sperm, which was, according to common assumption, all responsible for the creation of a new life, was the cause of monsters to be born. Hence they were not portents of any kind, but simply part of the divine, though by now somehow corrupted creation—very much in the vein of Augustine's thinking (see below)[6].

[4] W. Williams, *Monsters and Their Meaning in Early Modern Culture: Mighty Magic*, Oxford and New York 2011. For the horrors of outer space in modern science fiction, one can find a legion of relevant studies; see, for instance, J. R. Lewis, *UFOs and Popular Culture: An Encyclopedia of Contemporary Myth*, Santa Barbara, CA, 2000; M. Keith Booker, *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds, and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-1964*, Westport, CT, 2001.

[5] See, for instance, C. Lecouteux, *Les Monstres dans la Pensée médiévale européenne: Essai de Présentation* (Cultures et Civilisation Médiévales, X). See also the contributions to *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. J. J. Cohen, Minneapolis and London 1996; David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*, Montreal, Kingston, *et al.* 1996; C. Kappler, *Monstres, démons et merveilles a la fin du moyen âge*, Paris 1980; *Dämonen, Monster, Fabelwesen*, ed. U. Müller and Werner Wunderlich, St. Gallen 1999.

[6] Simek, *Erde und Kosmos*, 115. See also S. Caroti, *Mirabilia e monstra nei 'Quodlibeta'*

The encyclopedist Konrad of Megenberg (1309-1374) suggested that monsters were creatures without souls (*Book of Nature*, 486-89). Peter de Abano (ca. 1257-1315) maintained that the shape of an individual's head would determine his human or monstrous nature. Many opined that if pregnant women gazed at unnatural objects or beings that were evil or sinful, this then could transform their fetus into a monster. Other authors emphasized that people engendered monsters if they copulated in an 'unnatural' way, with woman on top, instead of the traditional and only accepted missionary position. In the late Middle Ages we increasingly hear of comments that an unfortunate constellation of the stars or the influence of the devil made up the central etiology of monsters. Obviously, we are dealing with a wide range of efforts to come to terms with strange phenomena of misshapen people or strange creatures, who actually existed, and with imaginary monsters the artists and writers projected. The degree to which the explanations for the monstrous races differed from each other reveals how little there was a serious attempt, if any at all, to verify the accounts of monsters, and also how much the conviction that monsters existed dominated the common opinion[7]. After all, myths or imaginary concepts tend to have a much longer lifetime than we ever would assume because they excite the fantasy and take the observer out of the realm of the ordinary.

The geographer and court physician in Persia, Ctesias (fl. ca. 400 B.C.E.), in his book titled *Indika*, refers, for instance, to the Cynocephali, or dogheads, as some of the inhabitants of distant India, where monsters existed, as most Europeans believed, and this far into the early modern age. He basically set the stage for the epistemic horizon where all verifiable knowledge becomes fuzzy and escapes the critical analysis, projecting a world of monsters in the distant Orient. Ctesias also mentioned the Pygmies, the Sciapods, Blemmyae, Panotii, and other strange creatures[8]. Plinius the Elder, in his *Naturalis historia* (77-79 C.E.), drawing on a wide range of older sources, refers to many fantastic creatures and presents a whole panorama of monster, which were subsequently copied by countless writers and artists in the following centuries. Throughout time we hear of the so-called *Marvels of the East*, and the versions of the *Romance of Alexander*, also known as the *Wars of Alexander*, are legion, especially because they attracted readers' mind through the reference to all sorts of monsters, celebrating those creatures as horrifying beasts and yet as fascinating beings who reflect what we all could become or turn into under certain circumstances, or what represents our greatest fears[9]. Monster lore

de Nicole Oresme, in «History and Philosophy of Life Sciences», 1984 (6: 2), p. 133-50; E. Grant, *God and Reason in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge and New York 2001; B. Hansen, *Nicole Oresme and* The marvels of Nature: *A Study of his* De causis mirabilium *with critical edition, translation, and commentary*, Toronto 1985.

[7] M. E. Graf von Matuschka, *Monstren*, in *Lexikon des Mittelalters* VI. Munich and Zurich 1993, col. 772-73.

[8] J. J. Cohen, *The Limits of Knowing: Monsters and the Regulation of Medieval Popular Culture*, in «Medieval Folklore», 1994 (III), pp. 1-37.

[9] *The Wars of Alexander*, ed. H. N. Duggan and T. Turville-Petre, Oxford 1989. See also J. Brummack, *Die Darstellung des Orients in den deutschen Alexandergeschichten des Mittelalters*, Berlin 1966; see now the contributions to *Alexanderdichtungen im Mittelalter: Kulturelle Selbstbestimmung im Kontext literarischer Beziehungen*, ed. J.

was so important because of the fascination which it exerted on people's minds, since it represented difference and similarity all at the same time, which Jacques Derrida identified, in theoretical terms, as "supplement," meaning 'addition and' and 'substitute'[10]. Gaius Julius Solinus, in his *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* (ca. 250 C.E.), offered a true wealth of teratological examples, which medieval people happily adopted and translated for their own purposes[11]. Cartographers throughout time enjoyed placing monsters at the edge of their maps, such as in the Hereford *mappamundi*, the Ebstorf *mappamundi*, or the Psalter *mappamundi* (British Library)[12]. Going back to antiquity, we ought to embrace the definition given by David Williams, «The mimesis of this originally Platonic tradition is of a wholly different kind from that derived from the Aristotelian tradition, since it attempts to communicate representations, not of the particulars of a material world, but rather of an absent world of Forms»[13].

As virtually all monster scholars have confirmed, the biological or historical reality behind monsters never mattered much, while the firm belief in their existence, resulting from the trust in the authority of the ancient authors, was of supreme importance. As Cohen underscores, «they reify a fear while satisfying a need both intellectual and cultural»[14]. And he added the important note, these marvels and monsters «offered the possibility of escape without the inconvenience of actual travel, and the possibility of subversion without the consequence of action. [...] That marvelous knowledge which had been sealed behind an inaccessible horizon was being offered on a gilded plate, with nothing to fight and every intellectual satisfaction to gain»[15].

Most significantly, St. Augustine identified the monsters as integral elements of providential history which reveal God's greatness and expose

Cölln, S. Friede, and H. Wulfram, Göttingen 2000.

[10] J. Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson, Chicago 1981; here cited from J. Cohen, *The Limits of Knowing*, cit. pp. 15-16.

[11] J. Berger de Yivrey, *Traditions tératologiques ou récits de l'Antiquité et du moyen âge en occident sur quelques point de la fable, du merveilleuy e de l'histoire naturell*, Paris 1836; R. W. Barber and A. Riches, *A Dictionary of Fabulous Beasts*, London 1971; see also the contributions to *Monsters and Demons in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds: Papers Presented in Honor of Edith Porada*, Mainz 1987; A. Hopf and A. Hopf, *Fabelwesen*, Munich 1980; C. Lecouteux, *Les Monstres dans la pensée médiévale européenne: Essai de présentation*, 2nd ed. Paris 1995; G.-H. Schumacher, *Monster und Dämonen: Unfälle der Natur. Eine Kulturgeschichte*, Berlin 1993; D. Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature*, Exeter 1996; L. Daston and K. Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750*, New York 1998. Most seminal continue to be J. Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, Cambridge, MA, 1981; and J. J. Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters and the Middle Ages*, Minneapolis, 1999. For postmodern, in my opinion too speculative interpretations, see the contributions to *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, ed. B. Bildhauer and R. Mills, Toronto and Buffalo 2003.

[12] N. Reed Kline, *Maps, Monsters and Misericords: From Creation to Apocalypse*, in *The Profane Arts of the Middle Ages* 11, 2003, pp. 177-191 (based on her monograph *Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm*, Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester, NY, 2001; S. T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, Oxford 2009, pp. 87-90.

[13] D. Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, cit., p. 7.

[14] J. Cohen, *The Limits of Knowing*, cit., p. 9.

[15] *Ivi*, p. 10.

human ignorance. In his *De civitate dei*, composed in the early fifth century, he emphasized (X, 16):

> In order to commend to us the oracles of His truth, however, God has, by means of those immortal messengers who proclaim not their own pride, but His majesty, performed miracles of a greater, more certain and more celebrated kind. He has done this so that those among the godly who are weak should not be persuaded to embrace false religion by those who require us to sacrifice to them [...][16].

Even more explicitly, in Book XXI, chapter 8, he confirms,

> just as it was not impossible for God to create whatever natures He chose, so it is not impossible for Him to change those natures which He has created in whatever way He chooses. This is why there has sprung up so great a multitude of those marvels which are called 'monsters', signs', 'portents' or prodigies' [...] these things which are called monsters, signs, portents and prodigies ought to demonstrate to us [...] that God will do with the bodies of the dead what He foretold: that there is no difficulty to impede Him, and no law of nature to forbid Him, from so doing[17].

Many theologians and scholars followed his lead, so monsters became an integral element of most encyclopedic writings throughouot the Middle Ages and beyond, starting with Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* (completed ca. 636).

Equally important, we find representations of monsters in many art form, both in stone sculptures (gargoyles, column capitals, ceiling bosses), wood carvings (misericords), and in book illustrations. Late-medieval artists apparently knew no limits in drawing grotesque and bizarre figures in the margins of all kinds of books, such as psalters, *Books of Hours*, liturgical books, and many others, creating a virtual pantheon of monsters that defied all laws of nature and titillated the viewer's fantasy[18]. These monsters all contributed to the broad discourse on 'the Other,' a deep current in medieval thought regarding foreigners and foreign worlds, although the responses changed from genre to genre, from period to period, and from writer/artist to another[19].

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[16] Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. by R. W. Dyson, Cambridge 1998, pp. 415.
[17] Augustine, *The City of God*, cit., pp. 1063-64.
[18] A. Bovey, *Monsters and Grotesques in Medieval Manuscripts*, Toronto and Buffalo 2002; see also R. Wittkower, *Marvels of the East: A Study on the History of Monsters*, in: «Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute» 1942 (5), pp. 159-197; L. Randall, *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts*, Berkeley, CA, 1966; M. Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*, London 1992.
[19] See the contributions to *Meeting the Foreign in the Middle Ages*, ed. A. Classen, New York and London 2002. For case studies focusing on the late Middle Ages and the early modern time, see the contributions to *Foreign Encounters: Case Studies in German Literature Before 1700*, ed. M.R. Wade and G. Ehrstine, in «Daphnis», 2004 (33: 1-2). Now see also A. S. Mittman, *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England*, New York 2006 (Studies in Medieval History and Culture); id. and S. M. Kim, *The Exposed Body and the Gendered* Blemmye*: Reading the* Wonders of the East, in Albrecht Classen (ed.), *Sexuality in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: New Approaches to a Fundamental Cultural-Historical and Literary-Anthropological Theme*, Berlin and New

This now allows us to turn to a number of different texts from the early to the late Middle Ages where monsters of all kinds assumed important roles, although they are regularly eliminated and removed as a threat to the protagonist. In fact, that protagonist proves him/herself by defeating and eliminating that monster. Wherever we confront monsters, we also detect strategic efforts to project a macrocosmic worldview in which even monsters were functional. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen remarked,

> Transformed from cultural embodiment into text and read as signifiers, they hovered between their classical presence and Christian symbolism as they were received into the Middle Ages. Unlike the denizens of the bestiaries, allegorized out of all substantiality, the existence of the monstrous races became suspended between real and unreal, *bonus et malus*, grotesque and actual[20].

In Mary Campbell's words,

> *Wonders* exposes the inverted, marginal world of a nature that can mean but not fully be. Its world can *signify* the patterns and temptations of life at the center, in the *oikumene*, but literally and first it stands in opposition to the world we know and the laws that governit. Its subversive delightfulness lies in its stark presentation of what is Other, Beyond, and Outside. It promises to the credulous that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of, or at least fully accommodated for, in the 'official culture'[21].

As we have seen, the arts, literature, religion, and philosophy of the entire Middle Ages were deeply concerned with coming to terms with 'the Other' in multiple fashion. From very early on this found its fascinating expression in the enormous popular text, *The Voyage of St. Brendan* (*Vita Brendani* and *Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis*), first copied down in Ireland in Latin, probably in the eighth century, later translated and disseminated all over Europe. The *Navigatio* alone has survived in 125 manuscripts, an enormous figure for such an old narrative[22]. It was not uncommon for early Christian writers to engage with the figure of the monster since it served so well as an image of the absolute evil, whether we think of *Ecthra Fergusa maic Leiti* (*The Adventure of Fergus mac Leite*), the *Vita Sancti Columbae* (*Life of Saint Columba*), or the *Epistil Ísu* (*The Letter of Jesus*)[23]. Furthermore, the Old English heroic poem *Beowulf* is also predicated on the battle between the admirable protagonist and monsters, first Grendel, then his mother, and finally the dragon[24]. While

York 2008, pp. 171-215.

[20] J. Cohen, *The Limits of Knowing*, cit., pp. 29-30.

[21] M. B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600*, Ithaca, NY, and London 1988, pp. 84-85. See also the highly informative study by J. Baltrušaitis, *Il Medioevo fantastico: antichità ed esotismi nell'arte gotica*, trans. by F. Zuliani and F. Bovoli, Milano 1973, pp. 197-223.

[22] *The Voyage of Saint Brendan: Representative Versions of the Legend in English Translation with Indexes of Themes and Motifs from the Stories*, ed. W. R. J. Barron and G. S. Burgess, Exeter 2002.

[23] J. Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy: Encounters with Monsters in Early Irish Texts: An Investigation Related to the Process of Christianization and the Concept of Evil*, Turnhout, Belgium, 1996.

[24] *Beowulf: A New Translation for Oral Delivery*, by D. Ringler, Indianapolis and Cambridge 2007; see now D. Oswald, *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature*, Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK, and Rochester, NY, 2010. See also the

Beowulf has the strength and the youth to overcome the first two, thereby liberating Hrothgar's kingdom from its arch-enemy, evil incarnate, we might say, coming from the depth of the earth, or the bottom of the sea, at the end the venomous dragon kills him, yet has to give its own life in return. The struggle against monsters thus emerges as an existential endeavor, and each person, so to speak, has to find his/her own monster and defeat it in order to gain the own self.

In *The Voyage of St. Brendan* we do not encounter any of the monsters of the East, but Brendan constantly faces profound challenges, marvels, and prodigies that hardly ever receive adequate explanations. But these are not necessary because the experience of complete otherness, of the presence of the divine, and the realization that this journey is taking him and his fellow brothers on an allegorical, or spiritual journey through a metaphysical dimension are fully represented thereby. So we hear, for instance: «a man suddenly appeared in a great light before us, who immediately called us by our own names and saluted us»[25]; «As they were walking along the cliffs of the sea, a dog ran across them on a path and came to the feet of Saint Brendan as dogs usually come to heel to their masters»[26]; «When the brothers had fallen asleep, Saint Brendan saw the devil at work, namely an Ethiopian child holding a bridle in his hand and making fun with the brother already mentioned to his face»[27].

While many times the company encounters individuals or animals that we would categorize at least as strange or uncanny, one experience, often even depicted in late-medieval manuscripts containing that text in one or the other language version, stands out as extraordinary, being monstrous in itself:

> When, however, they were plying the fire with wood and the pot began to boil, the island began to be in motion like a wave. The brothers rushed to the boat, crying out for protection to the holy father. He drew each one of them into the boat by his hand. Having left everything they had had on the island behind, they began to sail. Then the island moved out to sea[28].

Later Brendan reveals to his monks that God had already revealed to him at night that the island was not what it seemed, but that it was a humongous fish, by itself the most monstrous creature imaginable: «He is always trying to bring his tail to meet his head, but he cannot because of his length. His name is Jasconius»[29].

The narrator draws both from Pliny the Elder's account in his *Historia naturalis* (ca. 77-79 C.E.) as well as from the *Physiologus* (earliest version from the 2nd century C.E., or 4th century, first Latin translation ca. 700), if not from Saint Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, and all shared the same fascination with the imagination of an archaic creature as large as a whole island, reflecting the notion of the instability of the entire world.

seminal studies by J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays*, ed. C. Tolkien, Boston 1983.
[25] *The Voyage of Saint Brendan*, cit., p. 27.
[26] *Ivi*, pp. 30-31.
[27] *Ivi*, p. 31.
[28] *Ivi*, p. 35.
[29] *Ibid.*

Only God would hence be the ultimate and only reliable source of all life[30].

The Christian worldview strictly separates the good from the evil, which is also expressed in concrete terms by reference to the monstrous and the divine, as the fleeting birds emphasize in their discussion with Brendan «We survive from the great destruction of the ancient enemy, but we were not associated with them through any sin of ours»[31]. Many times the pilgrims barely survive their suffering, and have to fast involuntarily for a long time, mostly in replication of biblical numbers (three or forty days). Saintly figures appear as much as devilish ones, and all of nature seems to be testing and challenging them in their pilgrimage. Not surprisingly, they are actually constantly in God's presence, which explains the appearance of strange and inexplicable phenomena, such as a fiery arrow that moves by itself, entering a monastery, lighting all lamps before the altar, and then disappearing again[32]. At another point the voyagers are pursued by a mighty monster that tries to devour them, but upon Brendan's prayer to God another beast arrives and cuts the other one into three pieces[33].

Later the company approaches an island that bears many similarities with the confines of Hell[34], and they become witnesses of how one among them is snatched away by the demons as a punishment for past deeds. But this is also combined with a reference to a volcano, intertwining, on the one hand, geophysical features of a monstrous kind with monstrous and divine creatures on the other:

> When they looked back for a distance at the island, they saw that the mountain was no longer covered with smoke, but was spouting flames from itself up to the ether and then breathing back, as it were, the same flames again upon itself. The whole mountain from the summit right down to the sea looked like on big pyre[35].

Not surprisingly, the company of travelers also encounters unfortunate Judas who relates to them his own destiny and suffering as a warning[36].

Ultimately, Brendan and his fellow brothers succeed in returning home, deeply humbled, yet also enlightened, especially because they had been graced with God's permission also to visit the Island of Delights, a kind of earthly paradise where divine grace manifests itself through a most pleasant natural environment and generous hospitality. Both the strange creatures and the horrifying lands, the suffering and joys, the terrifying experiences and the revelations all combine here to provide spiritual enlightenment. The monsters, demons, spirits, and other uncanny

[30] For a good survey of the various references and uses of this monster, see the article in Wikipedia (last accessed on Dec. 12, 2011). For the *Physiologus*, see the translation by Michael J. Curley, Austin, TX, and London 1979; see also Physiologus*: The Greek and Armenian Versions with a Study of Translation Techniques* by G. Muradyan, Leuven, Paris, and Dudley, MA, 2005.
[31] *Ivi*, p. 36.
[32] *Ivi*, p. 42
[33] *Ivi*, p. 47.
[34] *Ivi*, p. 55.
[35] *Ivi*, p. 56.
[36] *Ivi*, pp. 57-58.

creatures serve in multiple fashions as symbols, icons, and examples of man's sinfulness and the dangers for the soul if repentance and redemption are not sought and fought for already here on earth[37].

From here let us turn to a goliardic epic from ca. 1170 (ms. A) or ca. 1220/1230 (ms. B), that is, to the Middle High German verse narrative *Herzog Ernst*[38]. This was another highly popular piece of literature both in the Middle Ages, as witnessed by the numerous translations (even into Latin!)[39] and by a very rich body of modern research[40]. The narrative relates the life of the young Duke Ernst of Bavaria, whose widowed mother has remarried, responding to the Emperor Otte's wooing. Although Ernst step-father at first proves to be strongly inclined toward him, treating as his own son, a traitor soon destroys this level of confidentiality, and a bitter war breaks out. This eventually forces the protagonist to leave his country and to go on a crusade as the only available alternative to painful submission and possible execution. Before he reaches the Holy Land, however, he experiences many amazing adventures, especially with monsters, but he always survives and gains high respect everywhere. Subsequently he turns his back to the mysterious East, finds his way to Palestine, successfully defeats the heathens, and then travels home. Although it proves to be extremely difficult for him to change Otte's mind, ultimately the Emperor accepts Ernst's innocence and so welcomes him back to his court.

The anonymous author included many standard elements from traditional accounts of the mythical Orient, such as an episode about crane people (Grippians), the life-threatening loadstone mountain, and then lengthy reports about Ernst's peaceful but then also hostile struggle with

[37] For further research on this text, though mostly concerned with philological issues pertaining to the text transmission, see G. S. Burgess and C. Strijbosch, *The Legend of St Brendan: A Critical Bibliography*, Dublin 2000; for a recent study, see J. S. Mackley, *The Legend of St. Brendan: A Comparative Study of the Latin and Anglo-Norman Versions*, Leiden and Boston 2008.

[38] *Herzog Ernst: Ein mittelalterliches Abenteuerbuch*, ed., trans., with notes and an epilogue by B. Sowinski, Stuttgart 1970.

[39] *Gesta Ernesti ducis: Die Erfurter Prosa-Fassung der Sage von den Kämpfen und Abenteuern des Herzogs Ernst*, ed. P. C. Jacobsen and P. Orth, Erlangen 1997; Odo von Magdeburg, *Ernestus*, ed. and commentary by T. A.-P. Klein, Hildesheim 2000.

[40] See, for instance, A. Classen, *Medieval Travel into an Exotic Orient: The Spielmannsepos Herzog Ernst as a Travel into the Medieval Subconsciousness*, in A. Schwarz (ed.), Lesarten. New Methodologies and Old Texts, Frankfurt a. M., New York, and Paris 1990, pp. 103-24; id., *Multiculturalism in the German Middle Ages? The Rediscovery of a Modern Concept in the Past: The Case of* Herzog Ernst, in J. Rieder, L. E. Smith (ed.), *Multiculturalism and Representation. Selected Essays*, Honolulu 1996, pp. 198-219; A. Stein, *Die Wundervölker des Herzog Ernst (B): Zum Problem körpergebundener Authentizitiät im Medium der Schrift*, in W. Harms and C. Stephen Jaeger, together with A. Stein (eds.), *Fremdes wahrnehmen - fremdes Wahrnehmen: Studien zur Geschichte der Wahrnehmung und zur Begegnung von Kulturen in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, Stuttgart and Leipzig 1997, pp. 21-48; B. Haupt, *Ein Herzog in Fernost: Zu Herzog Ernst A/B*, in J.-M. Valentin *et al.* (eds.), *Bild, Rede, Schrift; Kleriker, Adel, Stadt und außerchristliche Kulturen in der Vormoderne; Wissenschaften und Literatur seit der Renaissance*, Bern 2007, pp. 157-168; A. Classen, *The Crusader as Lover and Tourist: Utopian Elements in Late Medieval German Literature: From Herzog Ernst to* Reinfried von Braunschweig *and* Fortunatus, in S. Jefferis (ed.), *Current Topics in Medieval German Literature: Texts and Analyses,* Göppingen 2008, pp. 83-102.

the various monstrous peoples. While in Grippia he still displays a certain degree of youthfulness and recklessness, which would have almost led to his death and that of all of his men, later adventures reveal a remarkable growing process, and this especially in his interaction with various types of monster peoples. Most significantly, as soon as he and a small group of his warriors have found their way through an insurmountable mountain by way of a raft which carries them on a river running through bottom of the mountain, Ernst assumes complete control of his own life, and so emerges as a true leader of his people, admired and trusted by everyone who fights on his side. Both the rescue from the loadstone mountain by means of deceiving griffins who think that they are easy prey for their youngsters, and the decision to have a raft build and dare the passage through the mountain represent major stepping stones in his personal development[41]. Both ideas still come from his advisor Wetzel, but as soon as they have reached the other world, Wetzel mostly disappears from the narrative account, giving room for the prince to determine his own life.

Monsters are generally viewed and described as dangerous, threatening, alien, horrifying, and fierce. But the situation in *Herzog Ernst* is quite different since the first monstrous people, ordinary peasants, fear him and his men more than they are afraid of them. Who or what is really a monster? Then, however, the entire company is welcomed by the local duke, who subsequently sends them to his king, the ruler of Arimaspî, who offers his full hospitality. This includes a one-year intensive language training, after which the interest in the bodily differences virtually seems to disappear from the narrative because a good communication has been established, which allows them all to share their experiences, values, and ideals. In fact, although Ernst lives in a country of monsters, cyclops, there is no further mention of their odd facial feature. Instead, the narrative focuses exclusively on the court, the king, Ernst's rich endowment with gifts, subsequently his energetic defense of that kingdom against a variety of evil-minded enemies, which leads to his appointment as a duke in that new country. The enemies are also identified as monsters, but this does not have any impact on the outcome of the battle, which the narrator describes like any other we often hear of in contemporary heroic poems or in *chansons de geste*.

Ernst performs to the best of his ability as a ruler over his country, handing out gifts, demonstrating generosity, and administering the dukedom in an energetic and honorable fashion. Curiously, the king of the Arimaspî proves to be much less monstrous than Emperor Otte back in Germany because he understands and sympathizes with Ernst's suffering and recognizes his great accomplishments, virtues, and knightly skills. As we learn from the narrator, the king treats him as his greatest vassal, paying him extraordinary respect: «mit triuwen herzeclîchen holt» (4463; he appreciated him with loyalty and heartfelt liking). The Middle High German term "triuwen" underscores how much this monster king and Ernst share one of the most fundamental values in courtly society, so the

[41] As to the symbolic function of these two mountains, see A. Classen, *The Mountain in Medieval German Literature Terra Incognita, Terrifying Geographical Location, or Overlooked but Important Entities in Medieval Mentality,* in S. Ireton and C. Schaumann (ed.), *Mountains in the History of German Literature*, Rochester, NY, forthcoming.

king's monstrosity does not matter at all. The Grippians, on the other hand, and the hostile monster peoples who attack the Arimaspians, are characterized as evil because of their lack of loyalty and courtly manners[42]. Their bodily appearance has hardly any impact; only the character and heart of a person matter.

Nevertheless, Ernst does not view his opponents as truly formidable or worthy for him as a European knight. Certainly, he knows that they are dangerous and threatening, but not really a match for his knightly skills, especially because they appear to be small and weak monsters (crane people!), and as such not respectable as equals in arms. Nevertheless, in the ensuing battle he would have almost lost and died, but can rescue himself and a handful of his men. In the course of time he never abandons his Eurocentric attitude and ultimate even collects one individual from each species, creating a kind of medieval zoo (e.g., v. 4995-4997; 5240-5225; 5306-5332). Although one of those creatures, the giant, subsequently turns into Ernst's 'friend,' he remains one of the monstrous creatures in his curiosity collection, which serves him, in the first place, for his personal entertainment, while looking at their strange features, and second, as important pawns when he strikes a new bond of trust with the Emperor Otte, who also wants to 'own' some of those monsters (5982-5589). As we often hear from medieval and early modern kings and other rules, monstrosities proved to be exceedingly valuable in enhancing their own glory since they could mirror themselves in them as masters even over the 'aberrations' of nature[43].

Not surprisingly, Duke Ernst does not settle in Arimaspî for good, which would be impossible for him as a Christian and as a non-monster, so as soon as an occasion arises, he departs secretly, journeys to the Holy Land, accomplishes his goals there, and finally returns home in the full glory of having defeated both monsters and heathens, having grown up to a mature person, representing now a true leader of his people because he has demonstrated his mastership even over the world of wonders in the mythical East. The anonymous author skillfully operates with the learned tradition, identifying the specific monstrous races and integrating them intelligently into the protagonist's adventurous experiences. But he also breaks down the strict barrier between humans and monsters, since some of the latter emerge as very similar in their behavior, virtues, and vices as all other peoples. The Grippians are evil, hostile, and aggressive, while the Arimaspians are peaceful, courtly, friendly, and hospitable. The other monstrous tribes simply stand in as necessary opponents against whom Ernst must fight to demonstrate his superiority, knightly powers, and leadership qualities. Once he has brought about order and peace for the Arimaspians, there is nothing left for him to do, which allows the narrator to turn to the next and final stages in the protagonist's life up to his return home, where he can overcome the Emperor's hostility and forge a new friendly relationship with him.

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[42] Otfrid Ehrismann, with Albrecht Classen, Winder McConnell, et al., *Ehre und Mut, Âventiure und Minne: Höfische Wortgeschichte aus dem Mittelalter*, Munich 1995, pp. 211-216.

[43] L. Dittrich, *Die Kulturgeschichte des Zoos*, Berlin 2001; E. Baratay and E. Hardouin-Fugier, *Zoo: A History of Zoological Gardens in the West*, London 2004.

Although monsters are normally located at the fringes of human civilization, at least in ancient and medieval accounts, we also encounter monsters who exist in the midst of courtly society, or at least very near by, profiling the fragility of all human life as we are wont to know it. The Anglo-Norman Marie de France (fl. ca. 1170-1200), author of *Lais*, *Fables*, and the religious text *L'Espurgatoire de Sainte Patrice*, possibly of the hagiographical narrative *La vie Seinte Audree* as well, also included a most fascinating tale of a werewolf, *Bisclavret*, in her *Lais*. While wolves commonly roamed medieval forests all over Europe, its deriative, the werewolf, fully falls into the domain of deeply ingrained and powerful myth[44]. Undoubtedly, Bisclavret certainly assumes the function of a monster, at least in body, while his inner character does not change as a result of the bodily transfiguration. The same applies to the courtly romance *Guillaume de Palerne* (ca. 119-1197), where the werewolf actually performs many good deeds and emerges as the savior of the idealized protagonists, rescuing them repeatedly from dangerous situations[45].

In *Bisclavret*, the male protagonist disappears for three days every week, during which he transforms into a werewolf, as he finally admits to his wife who had exerted heavy psychological pressure on him to reveal his secret. Although she had expressed her unwavering love for him, which should force him to tell her everything about the reasons for his strange absence, she is so horrified about the truth that she asks a lover, whom she had had rejected up to that point to retrieve her husband's clothes, which thus makes it impossible for Bisclavret to regain his human shape and hence to return home. The miserable werewolf spends a whole year in the forest, while his wife marries the other knight. One day the king goes hunting in the same forest, and the company comes across the werewolf, which they immediately want to kill because they are afraid of that monster. But because Bisclavret humbles himself at the king's feet, the latter recognizes his noble heart and allows him not only to live, but to spend his time at his court among the other knights. As he calls out, «See the marvellous way this beast humbles itself before me! It has the intelligence of a human and is pleading for mercy [...]»[46].

Certainly quite similar to Duke Ernst in his attitude to his collected monsters, this king proves to be delighted to have such an extraordinary creature at his court who displays the body of a monster and the heart of a knight. As the narrator informs us: «He considered the wolf to be a great wonder and loved it dearly, commanding all his people to guard it well for

[44] K. Roberts, *Eine kleine Kulturgeschichte des Werwolfs*, in U. Müller and W. Wunderlich (ed.), *Dämonen, Monster, Fabelwesen*, St. Gallen 1999, p. 565-581; S. O. Glosecki, *Wolf [Canis lupus] and Werewolf*, in C. Lindahl, J. McNamara, and J. Lindow (ed.), *Medieval Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs*, vol. 2, Santa Barbara, CA, Denver, and Oxford 2000, pp. 1057-1061.

[45] P. Simons, *The Significance of Rural Space in* Guillaume de Palerne, in A. Classen and C. Clason (eds.), *Rural Space in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, Berlin and New York, forthcoming (*Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, 9, 2012).

[46] p. 70. *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. with an introd. by G. S. Burgess and K. Busby, London 1986; for a historical-critical edition, see *Les Lais de Marie de France*, ed. Jean Rychner, Paris 1966, 2nd ed. 1981. On Marie herself, see E. Narin van Court, *Marie de France*, in J. Ruud (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature*, New York 2006, pp. 439-440.

love of him and not to do it any harm»[47]. In fact, Bisclavret enjoys a free life at court and is treated with full respect, which even extends to the sleeping accommodations:

> It [the werewolf] was love by everyone and so noble and gentle a beast was it that it never attempted to cause any harm. Wherever the king might go, it never wanted to be left behind. It accompanied him constantly and showed clearly that it loved him[48] (p. 70).

The next stage in the narrative development takes place when the king holds court and also invites the knight who had married Bisclavret's wife. We do not know how the werewolf recognizes him, but he is certainly fully aware of his deed of treachery, so Bisclavret immediately attacks him, but cannot kill him because the king intervenes and protects the victim. However, people begin to surmise that the knight must have done something wrong to the werewolf sometime in the past, which implies that they regard this monsters like any animal, such as a dog that defends his killed master[49]. At another occasion, the court goes to a hunt in the same forest where Bisclavret had been found originally. When his former wife arrives the next morning to bring a valuable gift, the werewolf attacks her and bites off her nose. Again the other courtiers are about to kill him in response to his outburst of violence, but a wise advisor recommends, instead, to question the lady, who then reveals the secret. This eventually makes it possible for Bisclavret to receive his clothing back, so that he can retransform into human shape, to the king's great delight, while the by now noseless woman is exiled from that region. Significantly, as we learn at the end, many of the women in the family were born without noses, as a permanent punishment for the treason committed by Bisclavret's evil, if not monstrous, wife. As Marie de France indicates, what matters is not the appearance, but one's ethical character and inner strength, hence the degree of honor and nobility. Of course, there are also possibilities to criticize Bisclavret who had never dared to reveal his secret to his own wife, and had to be forced by her to divulge finally what he was doing during those three days. In fact, the couple was suffering from a terrible lack of communication, which ultimately leads to their catastrophe[50].

As much as Marie drew her literary material from oral Breton sources, as she emphasizes repeatedly in her prologues, she also utilized standard monster lore for quite different purposes. The image of the

[47] p. 70.
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] For an example, see *Tiere als Freunde im Mittelalter: Eine Anthologie*. Eingeleitet, ausgewählt, übersetzt und kommentiert von Gabriela Kompatscher zusammen mit A. Classen und P. Dinzelbacher, Badenweiler 2010, pp. 261-272.
[50] R. Howard Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, Chicago and London 2003, p. 79-82; for a broader study of all of Marie's *lais*, see G. S. Burgess, *The Lais of Marie de France: Text and Context*, Athens, GA, 1987, pp. 71-78, 85-92, 152-162, *et passim*. Much ink, of course, has already been spilt on this *lai*; most recently, see M. Griffin, *The Beastly and the Courtly in Medieval Tales of Transformation: Bisclavret, Melion and Mélusine*, in: A. Damlé and A. Hostis (eds.), *The Beautiful and the Monstrous: Essays in French Literature, Thought and Culture*, Oxford 2010, p. 139-150; T. Bibring, *Sexualité douteuse et bestialité trompeuse dans Bisclavret de Marie de France*, in «French Studies: A Quarterly Review», 2009 (63.1), pp. 1-13.

werewolf served her to discuss the critical issues of how to distinguish between external appearance and internal truth, or, to be more precise, ugly and repulsive outer body versus beautiful, noble heart and soul—a classical trope of great appeal until the present, if we think of the Walt Disney movie *The Beauty and the Beast* (1991). While Bisclavret's wife does not possess the ethical and spiritual strength to look beyond the bodily limits, the king in this story grasps almost instantaneously what constitutes Bisclavret's true nature; hence he spares him, treats him like any of his other vassals and knights, and ultimately helps him to recover his human shape[51]. We never learn why Bisclavret suffers his terrible fate of turning into a werewolf on a regular basis, but we know that he is terrified about revealing that fact to his wife because he knows that she would not be strong enough to carry on in her love for him. We certainly might be justified in condemning him for his lack of trust in his wife, but his fears become true just too quickly. He was right in his assessment of her character, but he was also too weak to resist his wife's pleading. Since he knew of her character flaw, and was at the same time not strong enough to keep his secret, both figures actually prove to be guilty of having mishandled their situation. But this might be beside our point here, while we need to stay focused on the appearance of this monstrous figure. Everyone expresses clear horror about the werewolf, including Bisclavret himself, who knows that he is suffering from a curse since he does not dare to reveal to his lady for a long time where he hides his clothing[52]. Later, at court, Bisclavret is treated almost like an equal, but only because he has displayed courtly manners and is protected by the king. As soon as he starts attacking the knight and subsequently his former wife, everyone is ready to kill him, until an advisor intervenes.

The issue hence proves to be the inability of most people to see through the outer shell into an individual's heart. Much depends on the circumstances, the context, the intentions, and the actual performance by one of the monsters. In the case of *Herzog Ernst*, for instance, the protagonist attacks the Grippians only because they have kidnapped a beautiful Indian princess, and he further attacks other monstrous peoples in the World of Wonders because they threaten his own lord, the king of the Arimaspians. There monsters fight against monsters, and Ernst proves to be only a conduit, not the cause of the conflict. Both in Marie's *lais* and in the Middle High German goliardic epic the monster/s only matter insofar as they challenge standards of behavior, while their gruesome appearance disappears from our view as soon as they are described in courtly terms.

We may conclude that the monster, similarly as in *The Voyage of Saint Brendan*, fulfills an important epistemological function, not as a monster, but as a representative of otherness per se, which pertains to

[51] In this regard the entire narrative reflects deeply held philosophical convictions espoused by virtually everyone in the Middle Ages. See J. Bumke, *Die Blutstropfen im Schnee: Über Wahrnehmung und Erkenntnis im "Parzival" Wolframs von Eschenbach*, Tübingen 2001; see also the contributions to *Knowledge and Science: Problems of Epistemology in Medieval Philosophy*, M. Lutz-Bachmann, A. Fidora, and P. Antolic (ed.), Berlin 2004.

[52] *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. K. Busby and G. S. Burgess. London 1986, p. 69

religious, ethical, and moral issues. Ironically, Marie's *Bisclavret* concludes with the very switch in who is presented as a monster and who is not. The narrative begins with Bisclavret as the hidden Werewolf, and soon he cannot even mutate back to his human shape because of her nefarious betrayal. Yet ultimately, having regained clothing, i.e., human attributes, he can shad his external monstrosity, apparently for good. His former wife, however, at the end having lost her nose, which carries over to many women among her descendants, is virtually made, like the other noseless females, into a monster in her own terms. Incorporating a monster, hence, into a literary framework provides the authors with a powerful tool to reflect on profound ethical, philosophical, and moral issues in terms of identity, character, honor, and chivalry.

Without going into details, it would be worthwhile investigating further this line of arguments in the late-medieval versions of the *Melusine* narrative, both in Old French (in prose by Jean d'Arras, in verse by Couldrette, ca. 1400) and in late-medieval German by Thüring von Ringoltingen (1456, first printed in 1474)., but suffice it here to observe only the parallel conflicts between the external monster (Melusine as half a snake, half as human, and this always only on Saturdays) and her husband Raymond of Poitiers who in the course of events betrays his wife's true nature, thereby betraying his own oath, and thus condemns her to exile outside of humanity in the world of demons. Melusine's monstrosity shines forth also in all her children who are marked in their faces by some deformation reminiscent of their mother's origin in the world of fairies, or the like. Raymond, by contrast, never loses his normal human features, but he fails as husband and as an honorable person. This weakness then carries over to his various sons, many of whom commit not only heroic deeds, but also cause severe damage to their fellow people, and even their brothers and relatives[53]. Once again, then, we recognize how much the figure of the monster profoundly contributed to epistemological explorations through the literary discourse, forcing the spectator to realize how much appearance can be deceptive and not revealing the full truth about a person's true character and value system.

We encounter quite a different approach to monsters when we turn to late-medieval travelogues, one of the most famous certainly being Marco Polo's *Il Milione*, compiled in 1298 while he lingered in a Genoese prison, together with Rustichello da Pisa Some scholars have voiced doubt as to the authenticity of Polo's entire report and his claims to have travelled all the way to China and having lived there for almost twenty years, while others defended it rigorously; so it continues to be a matter of debate that need not be resolved here[54]. What matters for us is that Marco Polo also engaged in the discourse concerning monsters, but took quite a different

[53] For a critical review of the history of research on Thüring's *Melusine*, see A. Classen, *The German Volksbuch: A Critical History of a Late-Medieval Genre*, Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter 1995, p. 141-162; for the historical-critical edition, see *Romane des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts: Nach den Erstausgaben mit sämtlichen Holzschnitten*, ed. J.-D. Müller, Frankfurt 1990, pp. 9-176; see also the excellent commentary there. For latest critical investigations, see the contributions to *Eulenspiegel trifft Melusine: Der frühneuhochdeutsche Prosaroman im Licht neuer Forschungen und Methoden. Akten der Lausanner Tagung vom 2. bis 4. Oktober 2008*, ed. C. Drittenbass and A. Schnyder, together with A. Schwarz, Amsterdam and New York 2010.

stance vis-à-vis their authenticity; that is, he voiced rather critical opinions and strongly deviated from the classical tradition as outlined above[55].

As many scholars have demonstrated, his *Il Milione*, as it was called out of a sense of doubt and yet also admiration, is a travelogue which constitutes one of the most important medieval narratives about the exchange between people from the West and those from the Far East[56]. Curiously, however, Polo hardly ever mentions monsters, and when he does so, he debunks the myth, such as when he refers to the unicorn. Although he is familiar with the common idea behind this mysterious creature, which could symbolize both Christ and sexuality per se[57], his own travel experiences have taught him that these unicorns are completely different creatures. After having discussed a type of animal that could have been confused with a unicorn, Polo comments: «They are not at all such as we describe them when we relate that they let themselves be captured by virgins, but clean contrary to our notions[58]».

According to his observations, this mythical being is nothing but a rhinoceros:

> They have wild elephants and plenty of unicorns, which are scarcely smaller than elephants. They have the hair of a buffalo and feet like an elephant's. They have a single large, black horn in the middle of the forehead[59].

In other words, Polo responds to the entire spectrum of monster lore but effectively deconstructs it because he insists on empirical studies and practical experiences that he had gained on his travels. He might certainly have exaggerated in many parts of his narrative, but since there is such a strong effort to verify and to demonstrate that he was an actual eye witness, there seems to be little convincing argument to question Polo's validity.

Another example are the pygmy men from India. Again Polo sharply criticizes those who propagate the myth of these monsters and explains who these small 'people' really are[60]. Those who have brought representatives of the pygmies with them «are involved in great falsehood

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[54] The strongest voice in the defense of the authenticity thesis is J. Larner, *Marco Polo and the Discovery of the World*, New Haven and London, 1999/2001.

[55] M. Polo, *Le devisement du monde*, éd. critique publiée sous la direction de P. Ménard, 6 vols., Geneva 2001-2009.

[56] *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West*, ed. S. Conklin Akbari and A. Iannucci, with the assistance of J. Tulk, Toronto and Buffalo, NY, 2008.

[57] J. W. Einhorn, *Spiritalis unicornis: das Einhorn als Bedeutungsträger in Literatur und Kunst des Mittelalters*. 2nd ed., Munich 1998. For a discussion of the erotic connotations of the unicorn, see M. Moffitt Peacock, *Hieronymus Bosch's Venetian St. Jerome*, *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 64.2 (1995), p. 71-85.

[58] *The travels of Marco Polo,* transl. and with an introd. by Ronald Latham, London 1979, p. 253.

[59] *Ibid*.

[60] Already Pliny the Elder refers to the pygmies in his *Historia naturalis*, X, 30, 1-3, and while these constitute one group of monsters living in the distant East, medieval and early modern writers consistently referred to dwarves, an autochthonous group of nonconforme beings. See C.-C. Kappler, *Monstres, démons et merveilles*, cit., pp. 131-132; Verner, *The Epistemology*, pp. 16-17 (as to Pliny), 36-37 (as to Isidore of Seville), pp. 146-147 (as to John Mandeville).

and deception»[61]. Angrily the author denounces those liars who utilize, as he describes in great detail, a sort of small monkeys, whose dead bodies they manipulate so as to look much more human like:

> This is all a piece of trickery, as you have heard. For nowhere in all the India or in wilder regions still was there ever seen any man so tiny as these seem to be[62].

Considering the length to which Polo went to dismantle so many false believes and myths about the wonders of the East, it comes as a surprise that even modern scholars tend to argue that he never traveled through the east Asian continent. Actually, the very fact itself that Polo's account often seems to be rather dry, factually oriented, anthropological, and not fanciful or inventive, supports his claim far beyond any doubt that he witnessed all those countries, people, customs, animals, plants, and objects that are mentioned here[63]. No wonder that teratology plays virtually no role in this famous travelogue.

This does not mean that Polo would not be interested in exotic aspects, as he emphasizes in his report about India: «Let me tell you next of some other marvels»[64]. With these marvels, however, he means cultural conditions, customs, habits, and types of behavior among the people in that world. This also includes sexuality, justice, patterns of fighting wars, clothing, food and drink, and religion. There is no room for monsters in Polo's *Il Milione*, at least in practical terms, while the history of teratology looms large in the background while he writes against it in most explicit terms.

The very opposite is the case in John Mandeville's report, *The Travels*, certainly a learned but fundamentally fantastic account by an armchair traveler, completed in ca. 1356[65]. Its popularity was enormous, and we might even call it a medieval 'bestseller'.

One of the many reasons for this phenomenon proves to be the fictional nature of his account, which combines many different scholarly sources, such as those listed above, and a variety of medieval travelogues

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[61] *The travels of Marco Polo,* cit., pp. 253-254.
[62] *Ivi*, p. 254.
[63] See the contributions by Susan Whitefield, Yunte Huang, and Longxi Zhang in *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West*, 2008. See also my study Marco Polos *Il Milione* / Le Divisament dou Monde*: Der Mythos vom Osten*, in Ulrich Müller and Werner Wunderlich (ed.), *Herrscher, Helden, Heilige*, Zürich 1996 (Mittelalter-Mythen, 1), pp. 423-436.
[64] *The travels of Marco Polo,* cit., p. 263.
[65] There are many different good editions available, such as: *The Defective Version of Mandeville's Travels*, ed. M. C. Seymour; Oxford 2002 (Early English Text Society, O.S., 319); *The Egerton Version of Mandeville's Travels*, ed. M. C. Seymour, Oxford 2010. See also *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, ed. by Ernest Coleman, Stroud 2005/2006. For pragmatic reasons, here I cite from *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, trans. with an introd. by C. W. R. D. Moseley, London 1983. For some critical opinions, see, for instance, Higgins, *Writing East: The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, Philadelphia 1997; M. C. Seymour, *Sir John Mandeville*, Aldershot 1993; G. Milton, *The Riddle and the Knight: In Search of Sir John Mandeville*, London 1996; M. Ángel Ladero Quesada, *Mundo real y mundos imaginarios. John Mandeville*, in F. Novoa Portela and F. Javier Villalba Ruiz de Toledo (ed.), *Viajes y viajeros en la Europa medieval*, Barcelona and Madrid 2007, pp. 55-74.

as well. At one point he even admits himself that he compiled his information from authoritative sources, such as Isidore of Seville and Batholomaeus Anglicus[66], which means, not from his own experiences. And when he mentions the legendary fountain of youth[67], no doubt remains as to the fictional, though certainly highly imaginative and truly fascinating nature of this travelogue[68]. Even comments regarding his personal observations cannot achieve the desired effect: «I busied myself greatly to know and understand by what means these things I mentioned were done» [69], which forces us to dismiss Mandeville as a serious translator or learner of foreign languages. Nevertheless, his audience particularly enjoyed his fantasies, which always tend to be more effective in reaching out to readers than bare bone and dry facts. The strategy to Orientalize the eastern continent in an extreme fashion rules supremely, so, for instance, when he comments on a well: «during the day [it] is so cold that no man can drink from it, and at night too hot to put a hand in»[70].

But Mandeville does not simply relate fairy tales; instead he skillfully weaves a narrative tapestry combining fact with fiction, learned aspects with imaginary material, such as with regard to reptiles:

> there are great numbers of dragons, crocodiles and other kinds of reptiles, so that men cannot live there. The crocodile is a kind of snake, brown on top of the back, with four feet and short legs and two great eyes. The body is so long and so big that where it has travelled across the sand it is as if a great tree has been dragged there[71].

When Mandeville turns to the horrifying features of the East, he mentions, first of all, cannibalism, a standard trope in many reports about foreign, exotic countries[72], exposing, above all, the fact that on an island fathers eat their sons and vice versa. This sets the stage for his discourse on monsters, whom he seems to have encountered personally, although we easily see through the web of fiction, being aware of the long learned history of teratology:

> There are many different kinds of people in these isles. In one, there is a race of great stature, like giants, foul and horrible to look at; they have one eye only, the middle of the foreheads. They eat raw flesh and raw fish. In another part, there are ugly folk without heads, who have eyes in each shoulder; their mouths are found, like a horseshoe, in the middle of their chest. In yet another part there are headless men whose eyes and mouthss are on their back. And there are in another place folk with flat faces, without noses or eyes; but they have two

[66] p. 118.
[67] p. 123.
[68] R. Tzanaki, *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences: A Study on the Reception of the Book of Sir John Mandeville (1371-1550)*. Aldershot, Hampshire, 2003, p. 6.
[69] p. 143.
[70] p. 117.
[71] p. 135.
[72] C. Avramescu, *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism*, trans. A. Ian Blyth, Princeton and Oxford 2003/2009; M. Llewelyn Price, *Consuming Passions: The Uses of Cannibalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, New York 2003; H. Blurton, *Cannibalism in High Medieval English Literature*, Basingstoke 2007.

small holes instead of eyes, and a flat lipless mouth[73].

The list of different types of monsters goes on, but with the exception of the «hermaphrodite[s]» Mandeville does not resort to any of the technical terms and relies, instead, on very descriptive terms because he obviously keeps his general audience in mind that does not want to be instructed about anthropological, ethnical issues, but rather wants to be excited, horrified, and amazed in simple but dramatic terms. Indeed, Mandeville knows very well how to apportion his narrative material, since he cannot afford to scare his readers/listerners off. Consequently, in the subsequent section he quickly turns to more geographical data, well balanced with reports about religious groups and institutions, especially when «they are very devout in their religion»[74]. However, talking about monsters proves to be just too attractive as to drop them entirely, so Mandeville returns to the issue when he has occasion to mention the pygmies in particular: they

> are men of small stature, for they are only three spans tall. But they are very handsome and well proortioned to their size. They marry when they are a year and half old, and beget children; they usually live seven or eight years[75].

Mandeville does not voice any particular opinion about them, does not formulate a value judgment, but refers to these pygmies because they are somewhat different from ordinary people, and yet still monstrous in a way. In fact, these and other monsters serve him as a kind of panopticum for general entertainment, since those creatures live too far away for any European ever to encounter them, unless they would travel as Marco Polo did. To bring his readers back to the ordinary discourse, Mandeville then concludes: «The Great Khan, who is lord of it, has this city looked after very well»[76]. Monsters, for him, and so the pygmies, are not inherently evil; instead they are simply the inhabitants of an exotic East that is to be believed by the European readers[77]. So, there is foreignness and familiarity, that is, the monstrous alterity is nicely couched in the more or less known world, and can thus be enjoyed as a curious element in a kaleidoscope of learned puzzle pieces.

Let us come to a conclusion as to the phenomenon of monsters in the Middle Ages, although we have by far not done justice to the vast corpus of literary and learned texts from that period dealing with monsters in a variety of ways. As we have seen, the classical tradition of teratology fully carried over to the subsequent epoch and was eagerly adopted by a variety of writers and artists. Some of them only wanted to don themselves with foreign feathers borrowed from the ancient scholars, the Church Fathers, and early-medieval encyclopedists such as Isidore of Seville and the anonymous compiler/author of the *Physiologus*. John Mandeville was a very late, but very illustrative example for that. Marco Polo viewed the

[73] p. 137.
[74] p. 139.
[75] p. 140.
[76] *Ibid.*
[77] Verner, *The Epistemology*, pp. 146-147.

entire discourse on monsters with much scepticism and actually made a solid attempt to undermine and dissolve it by means of empirical data that he himself had collected.

Poets and writers of courtly narratives, however, freely engaged with the images of monsters because they allowed them to discuss thereby ethical and moral problems and conflicts. By contrast, religious authors such as Saint Brendan also pursued teratology in their own terms because monstrous creatures served them well to reflect on the fundamental tensions between good and evil, God and the devil. Although the monster tropes, as developed in antiquity, seemed to dominate invariably, which Mandeville's *Travels* indicated above all, our analysis has demonstrated how much monsters could serve a wide variety of purposes as the protagonist's negative images, as opponents, but sometimes also as friends because the outer shell did not necessarily reflect the true inner core. A most intriguing example can be found also in courtly romance. Both in Chrétien de Troyes's Old French Yvain *and* in Hartmann von Aue's Middle High German *Iwein* (ca. 1170 vs. ca. 1200 respectively), the knight Calogrenant/Kalogreant reports about an adventure that he had experienced many years ago when he encountered a wild man, a monstrous figure, who was completely horrifying to him and yet was in complete control of the wild and ferocious animals of the forest, establishing an almost utopian, peaceful setting at that location This wild man inquires with him what the meaning of a knightly 'adventure' might be and then sends him off to the magical fountain, where the actual plot begins.

Although that creature looks like a monster, he proves to be peaceful and commands all the animals, proving to be a strong contrastive figure to the rather foolish knight, who soon thereafter experiences a most humiliating defeat at the hand of the lord of the fountain, King Ascalon[78]. Neither Chrétien nor Hartmann allow us clearly to comprehend who emerges as the better one among these two figures, the monster or the knight, which underscores once more how much medieval authors endeavored to utilize the monster lore for a wide range of ethical, moral, and religious purposes[79].

I have not much discussed monsters in medieval art, but reflecting on the large variety of functions that monsters could assume, we begin to fathom why monsters emerge in such a multiplicity of forms, shapes, colors, and features even within churches and monasteries, in cathedrals and public buildings, as gargoyles, as wooden carvings underneath misericords, as corbels, as figures on capitals (especially in Romanesque art), and in manuscript illustrations[80]. Apparently, medieval culture was

[78] Hartmann von Aue, *Iwein*. Mittelhochdeutsche/Neuhochdeutsch, ed. and trans. R. Krohn, commentary by M. Schnyder, Stuttgart 2011, vv. 403-599.

[79] R. Bartra, *Wild Men in the Looking Glass: The Mythic Origins of European Otherness*, trans. by C. T. Berrisford, Ann Arbor, MI, 1994; see also D. Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature*, Oxford 2000; for anthropological and art-historical perspectives on the wild man, see S. Leitch, *Mapping Ethnography in Early Modern Germany: New Worlds in Print Culture*, New York 2010, p. 37-62.

[80] A. Weir and J. Jerman, *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches*, London and New York 1986; D. Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons & Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art*, Princeton, NJ, 2003; S. T. Asma, *On Monsters*, cit.; Alixe

intimately attuned to the discourse of otherness, whether in religious or in scholarly, whether in literary or in medical contexts, and monsters generally provided—and actually continue to do so—an excellent medium to explore and to discuss the actual monsters in us, unless they are safely located in distant lands, most commonly in exotic India. Once the Orient had become more familiar, in the early modern world monsters could no longer populate that world, so the discovery of America in 1492 made it possible to transfer the ancient imagology of monsters to the new continent with the help of only slight adaptations[81].

Bovey, *Monsters and Grotesques*, cit.; A. S. Mittman, *Maps and Monsters*, cit.
[81] S. Leitch, *Mapping Ethnography*, cit., pp. 147-176.